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Should Manrico Escape?
Verdi, 'Miserere ... Ah, che la morte ognora'
(Leonora, Manrico), *Il trovatore*, Act IV

JONATHAN HICKS

We begin in the Malay Archipelago, in the sixth chapter of Joseph Conrad's debut novel, *Almayer's Folly* (1895). A dashing Balinese prince is on the run from Dutch sailors and seeks refuge with Rajah Lakamba, the elderly ruler of Sambir. After some deliberation, Lakamba agrees to shelter the runaway, and the prince bows out, leaving the Rajah alone with his dogsbody, Babalatchi. The scene is rich in sonic detail: Lakamba asserts authority by calling for silence then instructs Babalatchi to strike a gong; the dialogue is shadowed throughout by thunder, wind and rain; upon the prince's exit we hear the 'soothing hiss [of water] over the palm-leaf roof'. It is in this newly calmed acoustic that Lakamba arrives at a final decision: Almayer, the Dutch entrepreneur at the centre of the intrigue, 'must die to make our secret safe. He must die quietly, Babalatchi.' The coolness of the resolution is followed by a request to 'fetch the box of music' gifted to Lakamba by a Dutch captain: 'Through the open shutter the notes of Verdi's music floated out on the great silence over the river and forest. Lakamba listened with closed eyes and a delighted smile ... while under the unsteady hand of the statesman of Sambir the *Trovatore* fitfully wept, wailed, and bade good-bye to his Leonore [sic] again and again in a mournful round of tearful and endless iteration.'¹

There are many operatic excerpts in nineteenth-century novels, but this one seems particularly appropriate to Conrad's colonial tale. As Verdi once wrote: 'In the heart of Africa or the Indies you will always hear *Il trovatore*.'² This half-boastful, half-weary claim was reprised by Julian Budden in his biography of the composer: 'From its première in 1853 until it was overtaken by Gounod's *Faust* [*Il trovatore*] was the most popular opera in the entire repertoire. Parodies of it sprang up everywhere. "Ah, che la morte ognora" and "Il balen" were to be heard on every barrel organ and street piano in the world.'³ Without wishing to collude in exaggeration, we might say that Verdi's early reception was stalked by the spectre of musical ubiquity. And among the maestro's many creations, few travelled as far or as low as Manrico's prison tower lament. Crucially, it seems the troubadour was most mobile when taken out of context. Despite the dramatic, stylistic and spatial complexity routinely ascribed to Verdi's *Miserere* scene, the commonest encounter with 'Ah, che la morte ognora' involved no soprano part, let alone a monastic chorus.

Take the case of Axel Munthe, whose best-selling *Story of San Michele* (1929) recalls his medical studies in Paris, c.1880: 'poor old Don Gaetano came to play to me twice a week on his worn-out barrel-organ under my balcony in the Hôtel de l'Avenir. The "Miserere" from the "Trovatore" was his showpiece, and the melancholy old tune suited him well, both him and his half-frozen little monkey, who crouched on the barrel-organ in her red Garibaldi.'⁴ Though Munthe names the 'Miserere' he only

¹ For all the quotes from this passage, see Joseph Conrad, *Almayer's Folly* (New York, 1929), 87–9.

² Letter from Giuseppe Verdi to Count Opprandino Arrivabene (5 May 1862), quoted in Franco Abbiati, *Giuseppe Verdi* (Milan, 1959), 1: 643.

³ Julian Budden, *Verdi*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 2008), 233.

⁴ Axel Munthe, *The Story of San Michele* (New York, 1929), 28.

reprints Manrico's lines – 'Ah che la morte ognora / è tarda nel venir' ('Ah how slow death is in its coming') – and links the sentiment of the tenor part with the lives of real people: 'poor old Monsieur Alfredo' wandering about in the snow; penniless friends in the Italian poor; and finally Munthe's own privileged despondency at taking exams instead of holidays.⁵ For other writers, less ensconced in Left Bank mythology, the same tune did not signal pathos so much as populism.

In a piece for the *Los Angeles Herald* from 1897, a critic signed K.H.C. made a 'suggestive study' of that season's opera audience. Only two programmes drew packed houses: the Mascagni-Leoncavallo double bill and *Trovatore*. 'The great majority', the critic complained, 'are not attracted unless the music is fairly familiar to them. The barrel organs droned out "Ah che la Morte" and "Home to Our Mountains" in the days of our youth ... Enhanced by such associations it seems to be almost popular and about the "correct thing" to hear the same airs rendered by real Italian artists straight from Milan.'⁶ It seems that *Trovatore*'s street life often preceded its stage life, and for critics such as K.H.C. this could only cheapen the opera's value.

We find similar sentiments much earlier in Victorian Britain. Charles Dickens, for example, did not think highly of *Trovatore*: he described a performance in Milan as 'miserable indeed' and another in Naples as 'rubbish on the whole'.⁷ Still, the journals he edited made frequent references to Verdi's work. In one satirical piece about 'The Battle of the Barrels', published the same year as the much-discussed Street Music Act of 1864, 'Il balen' is singled out as a cornerstone of the street corner repertoire.⁸ Two years later, another tongue-in-cheek report, this time on Italian companies touring the provinces, lists the operas performed in local theatres, including: '*Trovatore*, to which the local organs – the street ones, I mean – imparted a delightful familiarity'.⁹ There were, of course, other means of dragging Verdi's hero into the mud. Another sketch in the same journal had mocked 'the Yorkshire race' and its brassy serenades: 'I do not pretend to say, that because Ah, che la morte! is blown through a Yorkshire trumpet, fighting is altogether a stranger to Yorkshire fists', condescended the London journalist John Hollingshead, 'but I think that the man who conducts the melodies of Bellini ... is not likely to bite off his neighbour's eye'.¹⁰ The confusion between Verdi and Bellini may well have been deliberate; emasculation by Italian opera was a long-established trope, irrespective of composer. But the reference here is also more specific: the notion of Manrico's moaning as a means of musical improvement was surely meant to be as laughable as the rustic northerners, not least because this tune was so tainted by association with low-status street performance.

Indeed, by the close of the century the ubiquity of 'Ah che la morte ognora' not only attracted critical sneers, but also focused attention on its media of transmission. The 'mournful round of tearful and endless iteration' that brings Conrad's chapter to

⁵ Munthe, *San Michele*, 29.

⁶ K.H.C., 'The Opera Season', *Los Angeles Herald* (24 October 1897), 13.

⁷ See Madeline House, Angus Easson, Kathleen Tillotson and Graham Storey, eds., *The Letters of Charles Dickens: The Pilgrim Edition* (Oxford, 1993), 7: 181 and 192; quoted in Robert Terrell Bledsoe, *Dickens, Journalism, Music: 'Household Words' and 'All The Year Round'* (London, 2012), 10.

⁸ 'Battle of the Barrels', *All the Year Round* 11 (11 June 1864), 422.

⁹ 'Conversion by Opera', *All the Year Round* 16 (28 July 1866), 58.

¹⁰ John Hollingshead, 'Musical Prize Fight', *All the Year Round* 2 (12 November 1859), 68. I thank Bethany Gibson for bringing this report to my attention.

a close is not so much a coda as a repeat-and-fade motif. In the context of the novel it enfolds a racist presentation of the Rajah's sympathy deficit with a timely allusion to a condemned man's wails and a Bovary-esque obsession with operatic listening. I suggest it also speaks to the condition of mechanical music per se. More so than scores, which were among the most mobile goods in the Victorian economy, it was the rotating pinned barrel that embodied and instrumentalised music's perpetual presence. Manrico's melody was quite literally carried along with these developments. But only so far. Conrad's fin-de-siècle novel came at a pivotal moment in the history of sound recording. Before long the crank-handled organ would relinquish its claim to modernity and become an increasingly harmless object of nostalgia. This naturally led to a change in tone.

'Verdi, Verdi, when you wrote Il Trovatore did you dream / Of the city when the sun sinks low', wondered the English poet Alfred Noyes in 1904:
Of the organ and the monkey and the many-coloured stream
On the Picadilly pavement, of the myriad eyes that seem
To be litten for a moment with a wild Italian gleam
As A che la morte parodies the world's eternal theme
And pulses with the sunset-glow.¹¹

Shorn of its unsettling associations (at least as far as Noyes was concerned), the daily operatic grind could now be heard as an enchantment of the urban scene. Far from lowering the aesthetic status of Trovatore, such imagined pavement performance could elevate the music to the level of the universal and eternal. So where does that leave the notion of operatic ubiquity?

In contrast to the Abrahamic doctrine of omnipresence, we are not always all present to Verdi, or he to us. Instead, opera allows for comparison of alternative sorts of presence: street versus stage; stage versus record; then versus now. 'Ah che la morte ognora' is a case in point. In order for Verdi's troubadour to get out and about he first had to be made object-like, reproducible, and that much closer to the slow death of which he could not stop singing. At the same time, his conspicuous mobility can be described in terms of a redistribution of agency – away from the hands of the master composer and into those of the Sambir statesman, the dreaming doctor, and the Yorkshire trumpeter. One thing is for certain: no street I know still resounds to this prisoner's mournful tears, nor does endless iteration of his tune seem a likely prospect. Ubiquity, it seems, does not endure indefinitely, and that may be a blessing. The task for the historian is to question the comings and goings and, perhaps, at the end of the day, to bask in the glow of sunset: farewell Manrico, farewell, we will forget you soon enough.

¹¹ Alfred Boyes, 'The Barrel-organ', in *Poems* (London, 1904), 153.